

cahokia mounds

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THE PARK

Cahokia Mounds State Park preserves the remains of the central section of the only prehistoric Indian city north of Mexico. The actual name of this city is unknown, for it had been abandoned by its original inhabitants about three centuries before European contact. The name Cahokia derives from the Cahokia Indians of the Illini nation who were later immigrants to this area, arriving shortly before the French in the late 1600's.

The 650-acre park, a few miles northeast of East St. Louis, is under the direct management of the Illinois Department of Conservation. An agreement has been established whereby the Department of Conservation owns and maintains the park while the Illinois State Museum is responsible for archaeological research and interpretation. Excavations have been financed by the Department of Conservation, the National Science Foundation and various universities.

HISTORY

Indian Cultures: According to archaeological finds, the Cahokia site was first inhabited around 700 A.D. by prehistoric Indians of the late Woodland Culture. Living in compact villages, they hunted, fished, gathered wild food plants and practiced gardening.

Around 850 to 900 A.D. there emerged another group called the Mississippians. ("Woodland" and "Mississippian" are names assigned by archaeologists to describe these cultures; they are not tribal names. The Mississippians were so named because their culture was first discovered along the Mississippi River between St. Louis and Memphis.) These people were dependent on a well-developed agricultural system with corn, beans and squash as the principal cultivated crops. This stable food base, combined with hunting and fishing, enabled them to develop a very complex community with a highly specialized social, political and religious organization. This life style eventually became dominant and what is now known as the Cahokia site became a regional center for the Mississippian culture. There were satellite communities near the modern towns of Mitchell, Dupon, Lebanon and East St. Louis, Illinois, and St. Louis, Missouri.

City of Cahokia: The city of Cahokia covered about 6 square miles and had a population of tens of thousands. As Cahokia was primarily an urban area, the residential section was quite extensive. Houses were arranged along what appear to have been streets or around open plazas. The main agricultural fields were probably outside the city, but small garden plots would be found in the residential areas.

About 1150 A.D., a 12-to-15-foot high defensive stockade was built enclosing about 300 acres of the central city. Evidence shows that at least two more walls were erected in the same general location, the last constructed about 1300 A.D. It is estimated that approximately



Aerial view of the twin mounds with Monks Mound in the background.

15,000 logs were used for each construction. The second wall has been partially reconstructed on the park grounds east of Monks Mound.

THE MOUNDS

Originally there were over 100 mounds, but many were destroyed by cultivation before the numbering system was begun in 1871. The location of only 87 has been recorded. Of this number, 20 have been significantly altered or destroyed by modern farming methods and urban construction. About 40 mounds are presently preserved in the park and the rest are privately owned.

The mounds are entirely earthen. The soil was broken up with digging tools made of wood, shell or stone and transported in woven baskets to the construction site. Most mounds show evidence of several construction stages. The digging left large depressions called borrow pits, which can still be seen in the area. It is estimated that nearly 50 million cubic feet of earth was moved by the Indians for mound construction alone.

The mounds were for ceremonial activities of the living; only a few of them were used for burial purposes. The type of mound characterizing the Mississippian Period and most common at Cahokia is the platform mound. This type of mound was square or rectangular with sloping sides and a flat top which served as a base for buildings used for ceremonial and religious purposes or for residences of rulers or priests.

Monks Mound: The largest platform mound at Cahokia, Monks Mound, is the largest Indian mound north of Mexico and the largest prehistoric earthen construction in the world. Its base covers 14 acres, and it rises in four terraces to a height of 100 feet. On the fourth or highest terrace once stood a massive building at least 105 feet long, 48 feet wide and about 50 feet high.

Two other types of mounds, conical and ridge-tops, are found at Cahokia. The exact function of these mounds is not known. There are indi-



Reconstructed version of the second stockade which enclosed the central city.

cations that both may have been used for burial purposes. Ridgetop mounds also may have served as boundary markers for the city limits.

Mound 72: Excavation of a small ridgetop mound within the park, Mound 72, revealed nearly 300 ceremonial and sacrificial burials, mostly females in mass graves. The main burial appears to be a ruler, a male of about 45 years of age, laid down on a blanket or cape decorated with over 20,000 mother-of-pearl disc beads. He was surrounded by attendants who had been killed to serve him in the next world. Among the burial goods were two copper tubes, 15 carefully ground game stones (discoïdals or chunky stones), a basketload of mica and nearly 800 arrowheads from various parts of the Midwest. In another part of this mound were the bones of four men, their hands and heads missing. Near them, in the largest sacrificial pit, were the skeletons of 53 young women between the ages of 18 and 25.

WOODHENGES

Archaeological excavations have revealed the former location of four circular sun calendars of large, evenly spaced log posts. These calendars, named woodhenges because of their similarity to Stonehenge in England, were probably used to predict the changing seasons and to determine certain ceremonial periods important to an agricultural way of life. Constructed about 1000 A.D., they were an early and impressive exhibition of Indian science and engineering.

CAHOKIANS' FATE

The exact fate of the prehistoric Cahokians is unknown and many theories exist. A gradual decline in population began around 1300 A.D. and by 1500 A.D. the site had been abandoned. Around 1300 A.D. there was a climatic change throughout much of the southern part of the United States which may have adversely affected their food supply and made it increasingly difficult to feed a large population. Other contributing factors may have been depletion of natural resources, revolution, disease and war. Whatever the cause for abandonment, Cahokia represented the highest achievement of prehistoric Indian civilization north of Mexico.



Archaeological excavations in the park have been conducted by various institutions.

FACILITIES

Picnicking: There are several picnic areas with tables and park stoves. Three shelter houses, drinking water and toilets are also available.

Archaeological Excavations: During the summer archaeological excavation in the park can be viewed by the visitor. Interpreters and resident archaeologists are available to answer questions.

Camping: Family camping is permitted for tents and trailers, with some electricity available.

Museum: Various aspects of prehistoric life at Cahokia are on display.

Tours: For information about guided tours and lecture programs write to the Curator of Archaeology, Cahokia Mounds Museum, 8001 Collinsville Road, East St. Louis, Illinois, 62201, or phone (618) 344-4750.

Please: This area is for all to enjoy so help keep it clean. Put all litter in the nearest available trash container.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION . . .

Admittance will not be granted groups of 25 or more persons to any state park or conservation area unless permission from the park ranger has been secured to use the facilities. It is also required that groups of minors have adequate supervision and that at least one responsible adult

accompany each group of 15 minors. All pets must be on a leash.

Numerous state parks and memorials are within easy access of every part of the state. Lodges, cabins and dining rooms are important features of Illinois Beach, Starved Rock, Pere Marquette, White Pines Forest and Giant City. Reservations for lodging should be made with lodge managers.

All state parks are open the year round. When weather conditions necessitate the closing of park roads during freezing and thawing periods, access to park facilities is by foot only.

For further information concerning Illinois State Parks and Memorials write to the Department of Conservation, Division of Education, State Office Building, Springfield, 62706.

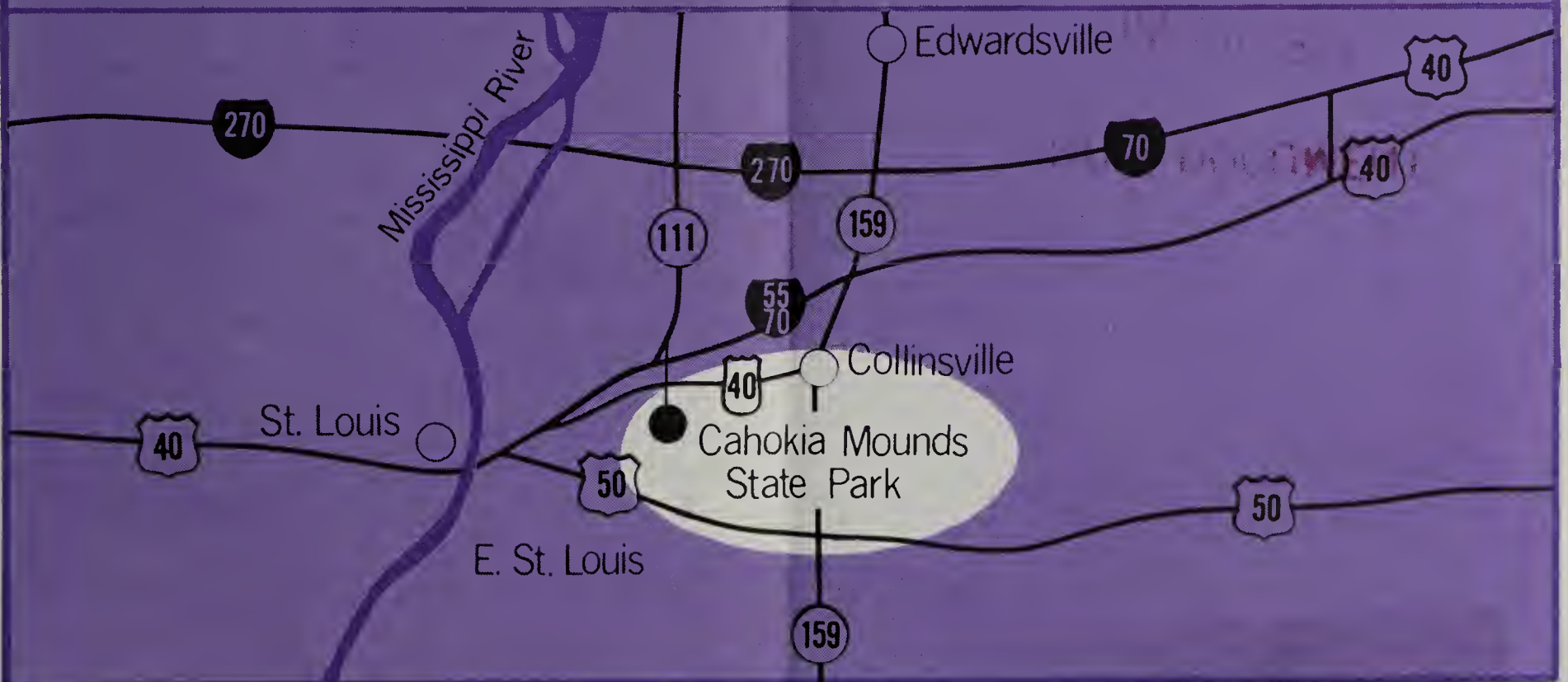
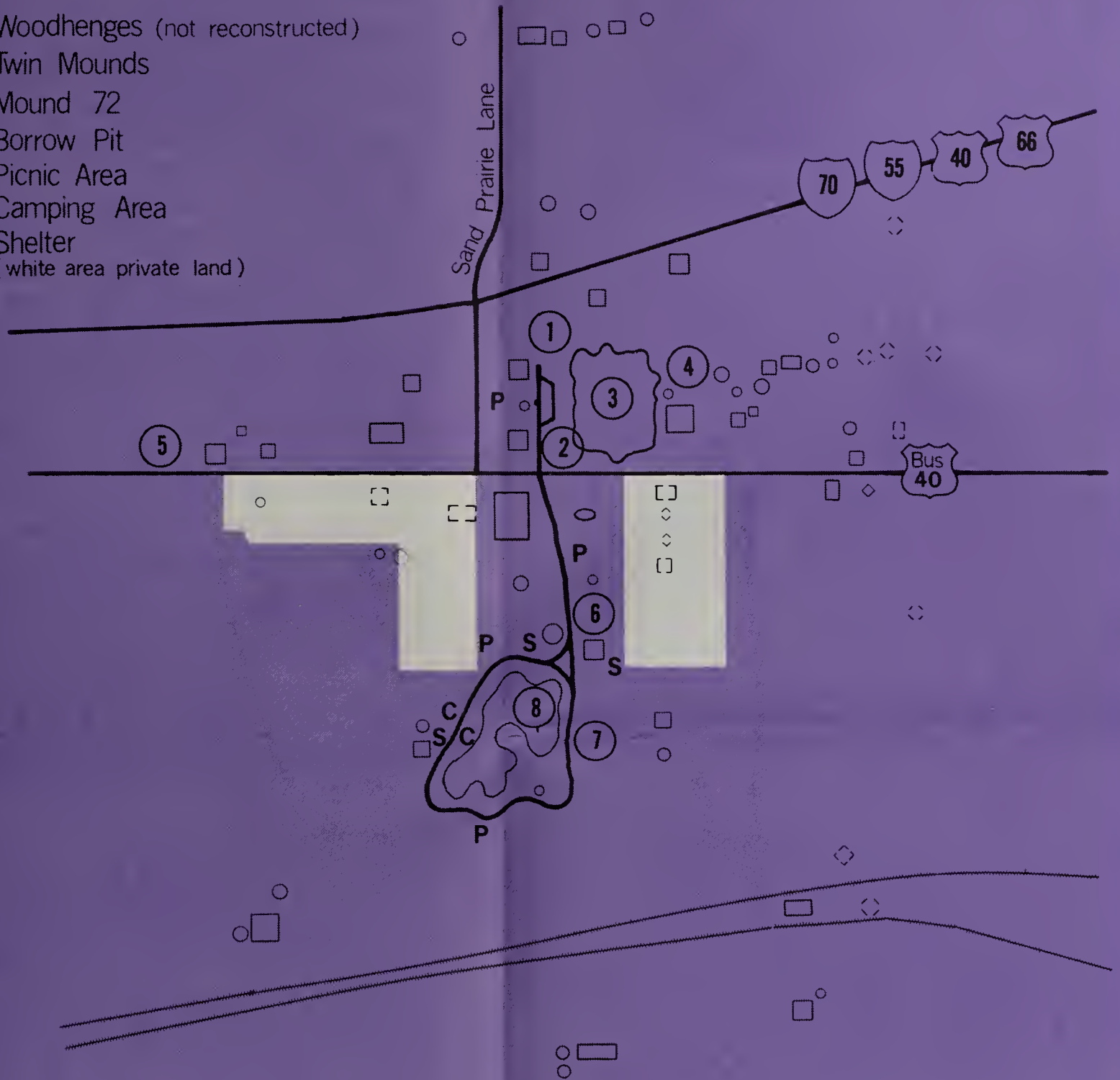


One of three arrow point caches recovered from Mound 72. (Illinois State Museum.)



12th-century Cahokia — From the summit of Monks Mound chiefs once looked southward across a broad plaza to the twin mounds. There the dead were prepared in the temple atop the truncated pyramid for burial in the adjoining conical mound. Some 100 other man-made mounds held official residences, temples and burials. Homes of poles thatched with grass clustered within and beyond the 15-foot high stockade. (National Geographic Society.)

- □ Mounds
- ◇ □ Destroyed Mounds
- ① Ranger's Station
- ② Museum
- ③ Monks Mounds
- ④ Reconstructed Stockade
- ⑤ Woodhenges (not reconstructed)
- ⑥ Twin Mounds
- ⑦ Mound 72
- ⑧ Borrow Pit
- P Picnic Area
- C Camping Area
- S Shelter
(white area private land)



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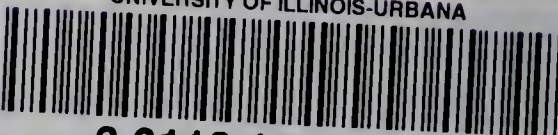
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